

Extraordinary managers discuss extraordinary management

## The Savvy CEO Speaks

**Karen A. Sweeney**, Vice President and General Manager of Turner Construction for Northeast Ohio, is our latest Savvy CEO. Turner provides building services to institutions that recognize the value of a partner who works diligently and creatively to find the best possible solution for each particular project. With 2002 construction volume of \$6.2 billion, Turner ranks first or second in major segments of the construction industry – performing work on more than 1,500 projects each year. Turner’s nationwide presence offers clients the accessibility and support of a local firm with the strength, stability and resources of a national company.

### **Karen, what is it you do that makes you successful?**

I am a second-generation descendent of hard-working immigrants. My grandparents had eleven children. He was a coal miner, she was a homemaker, and together they ensured all their children went to college. That work ethic drives me today. I want to make a difference with my work, with my team and with my family.

Much of my personal success comes from my ability to listen, to really understand what a client wants, to pay attention to body language, to sense when a client is unhappy and to ask the questions that help the client tell us what they want.

As a company, we are determined to differentiate ourselves from the competition. We work to deliver projects with flawless execution and always better than any of our

“In the square mile centered by Public Square, Turner has built 80% of the properties over our 100 years. That happens only in an environment of solid trust with our customers.”

Karen Sweeney

competitors. We don’t play games with our customers. We are upfront and build trust and confidence early on. This is critical to our success.

### **How did you learn to manage?**

Tony Kueshner, a supervisor early in my career, made me feel important to the team. He taught me to respect the trades, to learn from the skilled workers and to listen. At one point, two years into a high-rise project, he gave me a big interiors fit-out project for the building’s owner and expressed his confidence that I could do it. I was nervous, but he assured me he “would be there to help me out.” And he was. He would walk through the project with me and observe and support my efforts. He gave me a good strong management foundation. He inspired me with the dignity and respect he gave every person. I try to use those lessons everyday.

### **What are some of the challenges you face in the construction world?**

I have always been attracted to challenges, and that’s why I’m in Cleveland today. The business climate here was leveling off, and morale among our staff had declined when I took this opportunity three and a half years ago. We needed a jumpstart with our customers and our employees – communications was the key.



Karen Sweeney

With employees, we began by meeting individually to learn what each needed and how he or she wanted to contribute. We have a communications tree using project executives and managers to keep all of us on the same page and up-to-date. And I practice a walk-around management style. I like to spend time with all sorts of employees to learn what’s happening in their work and lives.

Clients need frequent communications, too. We meet with every client, visit job sites and talk to their people. We get out “on-the-street” to hear what people are beginning to talk about, what our competitors are doing, what the trends are, how our community is viewing construction needs. We act as detectives to learn what clients and prospects really want.

Other challenges are more about taking on responsibilities that no one else wants. After interning at construction sites during college and armed with my engineering degree, I was adamant about early assignments where I would be “back out in the field.” Many years later, I was assigned to the Special Projects Division (SPD) with a focus on smaller interior and base

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Right Person – New Job – Create Success

Jill, a very capable manager, is a real treasure in the company. Whenever there is a difficult assignment, Bob, the CEO, asks her to be a part of the solution. So when the problems with technology began to take up more and more of his time, Bob decided to ask his most dependable manager to lead the technology group. He knew she could be relied upon to address the problems in an efficient and cost effective way.

Jill was excited and challenged by the new assignment as she had little exposure to broad technology issues. In her usual thorough fashion, she began to meet with the key individuals in the department and the primary customers of IT (heads of manufacturing, finance, HR and distribution). Everyone had strong opinions about the problems and the consequences.

While Jill worked at clarifying the technology needs for the company, the systems continued to go down at

critical times. The warehouse managers loudly complained about shipments and out-of-stock inventory. The finance team blamed the late close on the system problems. And on and on.

Bob began to wonder if Jill wasn't as good as he thought. Could Jill correct the systems problems before a total meltdown occurred?

No, she couldn't. Not without help, anyway. Jill had not stopped long enough to recognize that she needed some unbiased systems expertise to help her manage through this process, and she was reluctant to spend additional money on outside support.

**What to do?**

Executives fail when they do not have the needed help to ensure success. When assigning a manager to a new job there are a few key "musts" to remember:

- With the manager, develop a plan to provide the training/consulting support necessary for the first

three to six months on the job.

- If the position is a significant increase in responsibility, provide external support for a specific length of time (i.e. a coach or consultant).
- If the position is a completely new area, provide function-specific support.
- Consider hiring an interim leader and assign your star as second.

The worse case scenario is to push a capable manager into a no-win situation. You could lose a good manager, create problems within the department and spend many dollars in cleaning up the fiasco later.

**The highest achieving executives tell us the key to their success was getting the help they needed when they needed it. You can help clear the way for success.**

Want some help in ensuring your key managers are successful? Contact Lee at The Nielsen Group at 440-786-8800 or lnielsen@thenielsengroup.com.

Want to Save Legal Fees?

**Want to save legal fees?** The answer is counter intuitive. If you spot a potential legal problem, the earlier you call your outside counsel, the less it is likely to cost you. A few years ago, the Corporate Law Section of the Cleveland Bar Association (made up largely of in-house lawyers) asked me to speak to their Section on the subject, "Making the Most Efficient Use of Your Outside Counsel." I confess that up until that time, it was a subject about which I had given very little thought.

But on reflection, the answer became clear. I had one client, quite large in fact, and a company that would be recognized by every business person in Northeast Ohio, who called me regularly. They called on all sorts of matters, but particularly

they reviewed all terminations with me. I then realized that over a 15-year period, they had never been sued – at least not on an employment matter.

On further reflection, a pattern clearly emerged. There was an inverse correlation between how early a client called and how much the ultimate legal bill would be. Take the example of the employment termination. If I review it beforehand, get the client's "ducks in a row," there is almost never a lawsuit or charge of discrimination.

If my first contact is after there is a letter from an attorney or immediately upon receipt of a discrimination charge, I can start damage control and either reduce the likelihood of the lawsuit or, when necessary, help the client settle quickly and maybe even cheaply. But

if my first contact is after the lawsuit is filed, the client is often in for the long haul and even the "short haul" – getting facts, filing an answer, preparing and responding to initial discovery – and it gets pricey.

So what difference does it make? Lawyers are expensive; don't those telephone calls add up? Yes, but you can make that phone call for approximately \$100. The lawsuit will cost in the neighborhood of \$100,000 or more just to defend it – and that's assuming you win. Do the math. That's more than 1,000 phone calls.

Tom Barnard is Chair of the Employment & Labor Law Group at Ulmer & Berne. The 160 lawyers of Ulmer & Berne operate from offices in Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati to provide business-oriented solutions to clients' problems. Contact Tom at 216-621-8400.

building projects. Most of the people that had been in SPD had a negative attitude about our work and, of course, we had our share of detractors within the company. So we had to educate our own people about why what we did was important to the business' bottom line and brought in new blood that understood how to implement this work cost effectively.

We needed to figure out a way to get SPD growing – and we did. We took the business from \$5 million to \$50 million in four years. We did it by making sure we knew what clients really needed and building trust early. We were always upfront with clients and still are. It is a way of life with us.

**How do you approach planning?**

We run a business within a very large corporation. We have the support and depth of resources, and we have the latitude to pursue the kind of projects that are relevant in our region. Of course, we're held tightly to our forecasts and must constantly grow the business. And we must deal with the changing economy like all businesses. However, the impacts of a recession in the world of construction may not be felt immediately. Many of our projects were started before the recession hit, so the recession years were smoother for us.

But construction dips come after the slump in most other businesses when planning and investing in construction wanes. So the challenge now is the future as we plan three to five years out. Right now, there are many projects on drawing boards but it may take five to ten years before these projects are ready. In some cases, we will wait until organizations have recovered from the poor economy and have the confidence to grow again.

**What about management courage?**

Well, it is the courage to expose your ideas to others: to be constantly exposing your inner thoughts to public discussion. It takes courage to manifest your ideas in a tangible way: to strike

*“Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great ones make you feel that you too, can become great.”*

Mark Twain

out in a new direction and discover what must happen for your vision to become viable. It's courageous to put your ideas “on the street” to be exposed, to accept controversy, to create credibility. The challenging vision you set may work, or it may not.

Most of us in this industry identify so closely with our work. Every building I have worked on becomes “my building” as it is for all of our project staff. Last month, I went to the opening of the new Dolan Science Center at John Carroll University and walked through with the project manager. As he watched students coming in and out of the building, he was thinking, “What are these kids doing in our building?” The tangible creation of our vision becomes very personal.

**What advice would you give to someone new to a role like yours?**

First, do what you love. I thought I wanted to be an architect, but when I got to the construction site, I found I wanted to be part of the daily excitement and see the tangible results of my work. I loved the action and wanted to make a difference. So first choose your work wisely.

And when you become a leader, get to know your people. Spend time with each employee, and let him or her tell you what is going on. They will, if you give them the opportunity. Be real with your team. Acknowledge when you are in tough times and tell them what you can, but also make sure to share the victories and acknowledge everyone's contributions to making it happen.

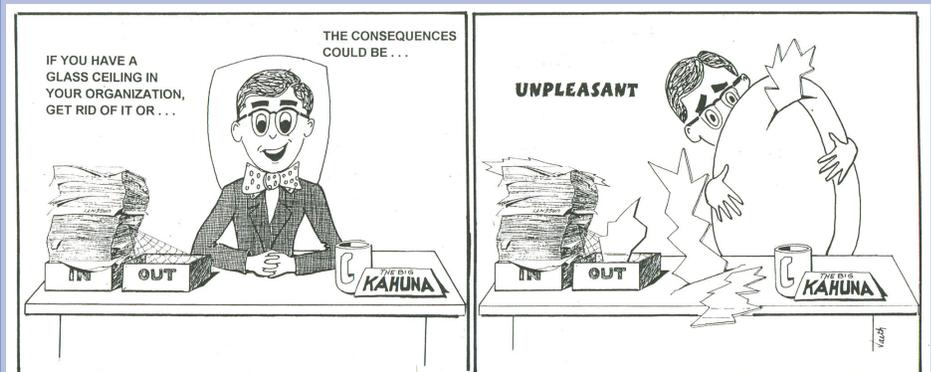
Find a way to maintain balance in your life and take care of yourself. I read and practice yoga. Both help me to hone my skills, think about things differently, more globally. And it helps to find some people outside of your industry to connect with to help to provide a ‘sanity’ check; find people in similar positions who understand the challenges of a job like yours.

A simple but important element for me is my work environment. In my early days, I worked on a jobsite in a windowless shed with no outside light. When we moved to the Hanna Building, we increased the lighting throughout the space as well as ensured everyone's access to natural daylight. Lighting and HVAC are both very important to how people function in the workplace. Outside light helps us to be more motivated and productive in the workplace. It works for us.

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The savvy ceo wannabe

Created by Howard Vaeth



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The Savvy CEO  
Extraordinary Managers™

**The Savvy CEO** provides the free exchange of ideas and reflection on the art of exceptional management.

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**Check Out Our New Web Site!**

[www.TheNielsenGroup.com](http://www.TheNielsenGroup.com)

**"I never did a day's work in all my life  
– it was fun."**

Thomas A. Edison

## The Nielsen Group

### Case Study:

Bill, the CFO of a fast-growing, young company, struggled to get the CEO's attention, felt isolated from his peers and spent hours dealing with his quarreling subordinates. He had the financial skills to excel in this position but problems working and communicating with his boss and peers could jeopardize his job. Discouraged, he began to seek other employment.

### What is going on?

Bill believed by working hard, staying late every night and reviewing all work from his department, he would be successful. His style had been successful in the past, but this job was very different.

### How we helped:

First, we helped Bill to understand that effective interpersonal skills were critical as he progressed in his career. To improve his relationships, Bill had to want to change. He could learn new communication techniques, write new style reports and attend more meetings, but it wouldn't have helped if Bill hadn't wanted to work differently with his team.

## We Help Executives Get Results

Then, we helped the CEO, Joe, to articulate his concerns about Bill. Next, we met together with Bill to discuss these concerns and let him know change was essential. And Joe took the time to be explicit about his expectations of Bill.

Later, we met with Bill separately to develop a plan to improve his relationships with his peers. Bill began meeting with each one and frankly admitted his poor communications efforts, then asked for suggestions. While this took resolve, the truly difficult task ahead was to follow some of those suggestions.

We supported Bill with weekly sessions to review his progress and began extensive teamwork development with Bill and his staff. In time, Bill was able to develop effective working relationships with his key contacts in his company. Bill is staying.

**It's Always About People.** It's not just a slogan; it is a deep understanding that organizational growth is achieved only through the people on your team. If your people are in stress, so is your organization.

To create a results-oriented environment, call The Nielsen Group at 440-786-8800.